Tony Cosimano
One Look, and He Was Hooked

by Martin J. Pociask

Martin J. Pociask, curator of Helicopter Foundation International, interviewed helicopter industry pioneer Tony Cosimano, who was “captivated” by helicopters after a chance viewing in 1956.
HFI: Tell us a little about your early life.

Cosimano: I was born in 1940 and raised in Jamestown, New York. I was the eldest of three. My father was a barber and grocer, with the barbershop located downstairs from our upstairs living area. There was a grocery store on the same floor as the barbershop. My family was very fortunate to have been in the grocery business during World War II as we always seemed to have plenty of food to eat.

My life and education were normal for the most part, living in the same house from birth until my departure to college. My main focus through junior and senior high school was music. I was first trumpet in the high school's band for my junior and senior years. I had a large 17-piece orchestra and a small combo that played at several events.

HFI: You had an early experience that involved a couple of noted personalities, a pioneer pilot, and a helicopter. Can you tell us about that?

Cosimano: The year was 1956. I was a junior in high school. Jamestown was the hometown of Lucille Ball. She often mentioned our little town in her weekly hit series. Both she and Desi Arnaz were coming to town for the world premiere of their latest movie, Forever Darling. The high school band was to lead the parade through town. It was a big deal. I just happened to be sick in bed. Somehow I talked my Mom into going to school and marching in the parade. That's the day that started my thoughts and dreams about helicopters.

Lucy and Desi arrived in the athletic field of our high school by helicopter. What an incredible sight to see it circle, then land. It was the first helicopter that I had ever seen in person. I was later to learn that it was a Bell helicopter flown by helicopter pioneer Floyd Carlson. Floyd was a classmate of Lucille in Jamestown. I met Floyd many years later and enjoyed reminiscing about that flight on a cold rainy February in '56.

HFI: Was aviation your focus at college?

Cosimano: My higher education focused on music, both in the performance and teaching areas. I attended the University of Michigan for one year and New York State University at Fredonia for six months.

HFI: Are there any particular events that stand from those years?

Cosimano: There were several momentous occasions, such as marching in the lead band in President John F. Kennedy's inaugural parade and meeting Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

HFI: And here you entered the aviation world.

Cosimano: Flying had always been a dream for me. West Point had a flying club that was based at Stewart Air Force Base in Newburgh, New York. I remember a flight with an instructor to assess my attitude and willingness to learn. The instructor was stern, to say the least, as he sat in tandem behind me with some form of an attention-getting prod under his control! I guess I did what I was supposed to do as my instructor accepted me into the club. The charge was $4 per flight hour. The charges were $2 for the instructor and $2 for the airplane.

HFI: You still had your fascination for helicopters?

Cosimano: I was more than fascinated with helicopters, I was captivated. I would spend as much time as I could with the helicopter flight detachment at West Point. Eventually I was told that I should apply to the U.S. Army flight school. The application process took several months before finally a
meeting with the Board of Officers on Governors Island in New York City. There were actually two of us who applied for flight school. We waited for months to receive word. I was accepted. This was the start of a new and different life for me.

**HFI:** Your next stop was Camp Wolters.

**Cosimano:** I reported to Camp Wolters, Texas, in November of 1962. As I recall, we were 144 ready-and-willing candidates who were prepared to give everything we had to be pilots and warrant officers. Many of this class washed out during those trying times. There was not a major push for army aviators as of yet since the airmobile concept was still in the planning. We were the class of 63-3W.

**HFI:** And this was where you flew your first helicopter.

**Cosimano:** Yes, I soloed in spring of 1963 at Camp Wolters in a Hiller OH23-D. The flight training was great. I really enjoyed learning to fly the Hiller, and my graduation day was one of the most exciting days of my life.

**HFI:** Where did you go after training?

**Cosimano:** I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, to become part of the group that would eventually form the 11th Air Assault. We initially had Sikorsky H-34s, but not for long. The Bell HU-1 — that would become the UH-1 Huey — was coming on line. I made several trips to the Bell Helicopter plant in Arlington, Texas. I was leaving Arlington for Fort Benning on the day JFK was assassinated.

**HFI:** Tell us about your time at Camp Stewart.

**Cosimano:** The 227th and 229th Aviation Battalions were the core units that flew various exercises at Camp Stewart, Georgia. We did everything from troop deployment to night formation flying.

We had a system installed on the helicopters called “Microvision.” This was a series of dots on the pilot’s window that would show the location of the helicopter in front so that we could fly instrument formations. I never got into the clouds with that system, fortunately.

Much of our training was done at night. I remember once we were on a routine troop transport near the Okefenokee Swamp. It was real dark, and I received a call from the pilot who was following me saying that something was coming out the engine area and burning all the way to ground. There was no close area to land, to say nothing about emergency equipment, so I flew to the nearest airfield. Not sure how long that took but it seemed like forever, with all instruments heading north toward the red lines. I landed, rolled the throttle back, and the engine immediately seized with the rotor blades coming to a very abrupt stop!

**HFI:** A tour of Vietnam was in your future.
Cosimano: We were told on a sunny August day to say goodbye to our families as we would leave for an undisclosed location at 4:00 a.m. the next morning. We loaded onto buses for Robins Air Force Base. We flew for 26 hours, with several stops along the way.

I was based in the Mekong Delta with the 114th Aviation Battalion. We were troop carriers; White Knight, Red Knight, and the gunships formed Cobra Platoon. I flew a troop carrier for a few months before going to Cobra Platoon. It is said that the Cobra gunship, which came about later, was named after our platoon.

HFI: Tell us about some of your experiences there.

Cosimano: Flying one of the oldest UH-1Bs in theatre, we were relocating slowly from the ramp to the runway at Vinh Long at about 20 feet over a large water area. The tail rotor came apart, hitting the main rotor blades and causing the helicopter to crash inverted in several feet of water. The four of us managed to kick our way out with only minor cuts and bruises.

HFI: You did also fly some newer models.

Cosimano: Yes, from the oldest to the newest! We were on a support mission involving the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] with the first flight of a new UH1-D that had approximately eight flight hours total. We started receiving fire from a nearby tree line. One round hit an engine oil line, which necessitated an immediate precautionary landing and engine shutdown.

We made a successful landing in a rice paddy with a few feet of water under us. Gunships were called in for support and, along with our ground defense, we must have chased the Viet Cong away.

A Sikorsky CH-37 Mojave arrived about an hour later and slung the machine back to Vinh Long. It was a perfect extraction; there was no damage to the machine other than a hole in the oil line. The CH-37 placed the helicopter down on the maintenance side of the ramp. The crew could not release the sling by any
method they tried. It seemed like they worked on the release for 10 to 15 minutes.

Then one of the engines on the CH-37 failed, with a nose pitch down, then up, then landing on the Huey! The Huey wrapped itself around the CH-37 and that was the end of that. A relatively new helicopter completely destroyed.

**HFI:** Your team also performed some defoliant drops.

**Cosimano:** Our Cobra team was very involved in supporting the Air Force’s C-123 aircraft that were used for Agent Orange defoliant drops, especially in the Mekong Delta region. We would fly as their wingmen and engage anything that would come our way on those low-level missions. There was always heavy activity, even though those on the ground were getting sprayed with the defoliant.

**HFI:** You got to see a good bit of the country by air.

**Cosimano:** One of the more interesting missions came about in the spring of 1965. Our Cobra gun team, consisting of two UH1-B gunships, and one UH1-B Hog (carrying 48 rockets), received orders to head north to the Phu Bai airport in Hue. This was a spectacular trip from one end of South Vietnam to the north-south border. The coastline and beaches were beautiful and, for the most part, peaceful.

The flight was about 500 nautical miles. Having arrived at the airport, the initial drive into the city was like going to a resort area. The devastation of the war had not yet reached this college town on the Perfume River. We were housed in a former French country club, the Cercle Sportif. This was as good as it gets, especially in a war zone. Our daily missions included flights around the newly built Da Nang Air Base and early-morning flights in and around the Dien Bien Phu area.

**HFI:** You had an adventure there that involved an elephant.

**Cosimano:** A group of Montagnards [indigenous people of the Central Highlands who supported South Vietnam during the war] lived very close to an area we flew over. We received word that their village was being shelled on a regular basis.

On a routine morning patrol, we noticed a howitzer being pulled by an elephant! I gave the head of the Montagnards the position of the gun and elephant. The Montagnards later requested our group to join them at their village for a feast of elephant! Not the best meat I have ever had, to say the least, but they presented me with the tusks.

**HFI:** When did you return from Vietnam?

**Cosimano:** I came home in September of 1965. My next assignment was in Ft. Rucker, Alabama, teaching tactical instruments in the Bell 47G-3B-1. One of my students was a lieutenant that I knew from my home town. Our first flight together ended with an engine failure and autorotation into a peanut patch! I stayed at Ft. Rucker until discharged in August 1966.

**HFI:** What did you do after you were discharged?

**Cosimano:** I applied for a pilot position with several airlines, hoping that would be the next step in my career. I had FAA ratings in helicopters and multiengine airplanes and it appeared all was headed in that direction until the major airline strike of 1966. So I decided instead to explore the helicopter market for employment, hoping that the strike would end quickly and I could get back into the airline program.
I responded to an ad from Chesapeake and Potomac Airways out of Baltimore, Maryland. A phone conversation led to a meeting at their facility at Baltimore/Washington International Airport (BWI) with industry pioneer and president and owner of the company, J. Cullen (Cully) Weadock.

Cully showed me his fleet of Bell 47G-2A-1s. They all looked brand-new; it was a perfect picture in every aspect. We flew very soon after that. Cully was a former Marine and very direct; one always knew where they stood with him. If I couldn't fly to his liking, I wouldn't be going any further.

I got the job and, although I didn't know it at the time, my aspirations to go to the airlines were over.

**HFI:** Following your Vietnam service and discharge from the Army in 1966, you went to work for Cullen (Cully) Weadock at Chesapeake and Potomac Airways.

**Cosimano:** I got the job and moved to Ramapo Valley Airport in Spring Valley, New York. There I met industry pioneers Dick Eimert and Ted Dubolsky. Our mission was to fly the AT&T underground telephone cable right-of-way. We would leave Ramapo on Monday, fly for about 40 hours, and return on Friday.

The route was from Spring Valley to just outside of Boston, across Massachusetts to Albany, New York, and then across New York State to Buffalo. We would then fly south to Ashtabula, Ohio, back to my hometown, Jamestown, New York, and then back across New York State to Albany. We finished up by flying south along the Hudson River back to Spring Valley.

**HFI:** That was quite the routine. Did you do that week in and week out?

**Cosimano:** I would vary the route weekly. I flew three weeks with one week off. One of the pilots from Baltimore would fly the week I was off.

**HFI:** Tell us about the working arrangement.

**Cosimano:** Ted Dubolsky had an auto-upholstery business in a small garage at the airport. Both cars and helicopters were fixed and maintained there. Ted and Dick Eimert had a long friendship; they both loved aviation.

Ted provided the base and financial stability to get the helicopter maintenance shop up and running while Dick was establishing his customer base, which was growing quickly. Cully came along with the weekly maintenance program for the Bell 47 and it worked perfectly. Come in Friday and leave Monday. This gave Dick the weekend to get the machine ready for another 40 hours. I really respected both Ted and Dick for all they did to make everything work.

I had a house in New City, thanks to Cully. He advanced the $9,000 down payment so I could provide a great environment for my family. It was a loan and became a bonus after my first year of work. Cully was a great guy.

**HFI:** I bet you looked forward to your weekends!

**Cosimano:** One would think that after 40 hours of low-level flight, it would be time to get out of the saddle, but my weekends were not those of rest and recuperation.

Fred Wehran came into my life shortly after the start at Spring Valley. Fred owned and operated Teterboro Airport in New Jersey, eventually selling it to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. He heard that there was a Bell 47 based at Ramapo and asked if I would teach him how to fly.

Fred was 70 years old and ready to go. I was young, just getting started, and could certainly use whatever extra money would come along. He mentioned that it would be very well worth my while, which is how I framed the situation in order to be gone seven days a week. Fred purchased a new Bell 47G-4, which was on site with us within a few weeks. Dick had a new helicopter to maintain, and I had about 10 hours of flight every weekend and a few extra dollars to work with.

Fred was a very quick learner. He really enjoyed it and so did I. Our focus, at his insistence, was on autorotations. Thousands of autorotations — at least it felt like that. Not sure how many skid shoes Dick Eimert replaced, but it was many!

**HFI:** You, Dick Eimert, and Ted Dubolsky partnered a new company.

**Cosimano:** Dick was already very involved in the maintenance program...
with companies from the New York area, and the three of us decided to form our own company in late 1968. We named the company DECAIR. The D for Dubolsky, E for Eimert, and C for Cosimano. Our first revenue flight was with a Brantly B-2. Dick and I hovered over an outside wedding reception, me flying and Dick dropping dollar bills from the doorless helicopter.

**HFI:** Tell us about your fleet and your flight school.

**Cosimano:** Our first owned helicopter was a Bell 47G. This helicopter was used for many seasons by Island Helicopters spraying crops on the east end of Long Island. We started our FAA-approved helicopter flight school using this machine. Not long after that, we acquired a new Bell 206A JetRanger. These machines established our role in charter in the New York City area.

We established a training program with Local 825 Operating Engineers — we trained their members who were already fixed-wing rated. They were very interested in being involved in the up-and-coming external-lift business in the metropolitan area, and we used our pilots as copilots on several external-lift projects in the years to come.

**HFI:** One of your early assignments was to provide aerial perimeter patrol at Woodstock.

**Cosimano:** DECAIR was growing fast. The summer of 1969 brought the Woodstock festival to an area about a 40-minute flight from our home base. I was approached by the head of their security to provide an aerial perimeter patrol to deter people from getting in for free.

We moved our two machines to the Sullivan County Airport in Bethel, New York, a day or two before the festival. The rest is history. The weather was terrible. The attendance that was projected to be about 50,000 turned into 400,000.

It was evident early on that our two Bell 47s would have no effect on the incoming crowds. We started to act as shuttles, bringing the organizers in and out of the event. It was also evident that there would be no way for the performers to get to the site, with all access roads stopped completely.

I had several meetings with the promoters on how to move forward and use helicopters for transportation of the performers. I also had the task of flying the medical doctor and his nurse to various locations. I called on all available helicopters to come and work with us. We had JetRangers from the New York area, a Sikorsky S-58 from Keystone Helicopter, and many more.

When all was said and done, the show went on. We all got paid and spent about three days in some of the most memorable conditions I have ever faced.

**HFI:** You were asked to fly out the body of one of the concert attendees.

**Cosimano:** One of my last flights was to fly out one of the two people who died at the festival. That person died while sleeping in a farmer's field and being run over by his tractor. I was asked to bring him from the site to the parking lot of the local hospital. I didn't receive a warm reception upon landing in the parking lot with a sheet-covered passenger on the outside tray of the helicopter. The state police had not made contact with the hospital to advise them that I would be arriving.

**HFI:** That contract really helped jumpstart DECAIR.

**Cosimano:** Woodstock gave DECAIR a very good financial boost. We expanded into bidding on an MTA [Metropolitan Transportation Authority] police contract that involved two new Bell 47G-4A helicopters flying about five hours each per day over the various commuter rail lines leading in and out of New York City. We had an MTA officer on board who had continuous contact with his headquarters if they required ground support or needed to stop a train. It was a very successful program and was credited in preventing several problems.

**HFI:** And DECAIR continued to grow.

**Cosimano:** DECAIR purchased a new Bell 205A-1. This helicopter was used for both VIP and utility missions. Jim Christensen was our first pilot hire;
Bob Truckenmiller was No. 2. Bob flew the 205 stringing a highline in the Pali Pass in Hawaii. I clearly remember his comments on how difficult that mission was.

**HFI:** How was your relationship with the local authorities?

**Cosimano:** We were very good neighbors from the onset. Our helicopters were made available at no cost to the local police and fire agencies. On many occasions, we were involved in rescues — including rescuing two young ladies who had fallen off a mountaintop to a rock ledge about halfway down the mountain. I flew the JetRanger, placing one skid on a large boulder while firemen loaded the girls.

We formed HELP, the Helicopter Emergency Lift Program, to assist the local agencies. Rockland County, New York, maintains an active helicopter program providing aerial support to local agencies.

**HFI:** DECAIR also worked movie shoots.

**Cosimano:** We were involved in many movie shoots in the New York area, including *The Godfather.*

**HFI:** Tell us about your environmental work.

**Cosimano:** We formed a company called Remote Environmental Sensing Systems, Inc., using a large, cumbersome infrared scanner located in the back and under a Bell 206. This was used to monitor pollution in the Hudson River and for letting businesses know the effects their facilities had on the environment.

**HFI:** DECAIR also did some international contract work.

**Cosimano:** DECAIR took a major leap into the international market when we received a request from two young Peruvian businessmen. They had requested that we explore the possibility of setting up operations in Peru to provide services for an oil exploration program in the jungle. I can recall this request sitting on my desks for several weeks. I finally said to the agents that I would come to Lima.

The possibilities were tremendous. Serious discussions followed with the Peruvian Air Force, the consortium of international oil companies, and our agents. We received the initial contract for two Bell 206s. The Peruvian Air Force sent a C-130 to Stewart Airport in Newburgh, New York, around Christmas 1971. The machines were loaded aboard and we were on our way. We ended up with five major base camps spread throughout the Peruvian jungle and an office in Lima.

Our operations manager, Charles Strachan, was one of Bell’s first salesmen, a great pilot, and a dear friend. There were several 206s flying about 180 hours per month, each doing seismic work. Bell 205s

DECAIR organized the shuttling of organizers, performers, medical personnel, and even deceased attendees at the Woodstock festival in August 1969.

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followed for the drilling phase. There were many pilots and mechanics employed for several years on this project. The logistics of operating and providing all the spares necessary to support this effort was tremendous.

**HFI:** You left DECAIR in 1978. Why?

**Cosimano:** I felt that, at a young age, I was starting to burn out. The stress of travel and distance from my family took its toll. I felt it was time to move on. In 1978, I sold my shares of DECAIR and briefly entered into a fish import business. There was a tremendous tuna fish shortage in the late 1970s. The answer was a large sardine that was prevalent in Peruvian waters. This fish had a taste very similar to the tuna. My brother and I imported several containers into the New York area.

**HFI:** But it wasn’t long before you returned to aviation.

**Cosimano:** The call back to aviation came about a year after I left DECAIR. A very good friend and former DECAIR S-58 pilot, Ben Kent, was forming a company in support of the fast-growing oil and gas industry of western New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. He had been asked by two brothers who owned the company to look into using helicopters. I had just moved back to Jamestown, close to the company’s headquarters. Ben asked if I would join him. I became their director of flight operations and stayed there through 1987.

**HFI:** You were involved in a rescue near the Canadian border.

**Cosimano:** Yes, Enviros also provided helicopters to the local communities. I recall an early-morning call by the Erie County Sheriff’s Department stating that there was an ice fisherman stranded on an ice floe in Lake Erie. The company’s president and owner, John Clarey, met me and a sheriff’s deputy at the hangar and we headed out.

We found the floe and the individual close to the Canadian side of the lake. He was barely able to move. I placed the left main gear on the floe, and the deputy was able to grab hold and get him into the machine. I then flew him directly to the main Buffalo hospital. He recovered completely.

**HFI:** You then moved on to New Jersey.

**Cosimano:** I was approached by Metromedia’s director of flight operations, James D’Agostino, to come to Teterboro and start their helicopter operation. This move brought me very close to my starting point in Spring Valley.

They had a new Eurocopter AS365 N2 Dauphin for corporate transportation. The helicopter was completed by Pat Cesaro’s company, Custom Aircraft Interiors [now Air Concepts International] at Teterboro Airport. Pat’s team installed an airstair door on the Dauphin. The interior was spectacular, and there was a new four-axis SFIM autopilot.

We flew many trips with the principal from New York’s 60th St. Heliport to Charlottesville, Virginia. The Charlottesville site was also the home of the Virginia Film Festival. More legendary film stars than I can remember were flown in that helicopter.

**HFI:** American International Group’s (AIG) flight department was also based in Teterboro.

**Cosimano:** Yes, we were actually based in the AIG hangar. AIG had a very vibrant flight department but did not have a helicopter in their fleet. I was very honored and excited when I was asked to become involved in starting a helicopter program for them. I left Metromedia and moved down the hall to AIG in 1995.

I was very fortunate to be involved in the very early stages of the AW139, which was manufactured solely in Italy. Pat Cesaro was also involved in our meetings with Agusta Italy in the very early stages. This gave him the opportunity to develop the initial Cocoon Noise Suppression system, as he had for many other helicopters. Fernando Mendez, master craftsman, accompanied us on one of our trips so that he could start to construct...
the prototype.

The combined developments of AgustaWestland and Air Concepts International have made the AW139, in my estimation, one of the finest corporate transport helicopters in our industry. The early association with this product enabled us to establish a worldwide customer advisory board, which I chaired for several years. Our meetings provided a vehicle to discuss various aircraft and operational issues. These forums are now well attended at the annual HAI HELI-EXPO® convention.

I maintained the position of helicopter chief pilot and assistant director of flight operations at AIG until my retirement in 2007.

**HFI:** You didn’t stay retired long.

**Cosimano:** I accepted a position with the Aero Toy Store, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 2007. It was in this position that I had the opportunity to bring several AW139s and A109 series helicopters from factory acceptance to completion, sales, and delivery.

**HFI:** You then made another career move.

**Cosimano:** I was offered the opportunity in 2010 to manage an AW139 start-up operation for a private client in Nassau, Bahamas. I left that position in January 2012 after establishing a complete helicopter program for the owner.

**HFI:** Ever active, you started yet another company!

**Cosimano:** I have been very active, for a retired person, with my company, International Aircraft Purchase & Lease, LLC, providing both consulting and pilot services to several clients. I say that with real joy, as I truly feel that I could not have been more fortunate than to have spent 50-plus years involved in exactly what I love, the helicopter industry.

**HFI:** And you can still spare time for family life?

**Cosimano:** Yes! My wife, Margaret (Peggy), and I have three daughters: Nancy, Tonette, and Adriana; and one son, Marc. I also have 10 grandchildren and five great grandchildren. How special! I also enjoy boating, fishing, and golf.

**HFI:** What organizations have you been affiliated with?

**Cosimano:** I have been a member of Helicopter Association International since leaving the military in 1966. I am a past member of the Orange County Community College Orchestra and advisory boards with the Teterboro Users Group. I was an active member in the Eastern Region Helicopter Council and first chairman of the AW139 Customer Users Group. I am currently an active member of the West Point Band Alumni Association, Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association, 114 Aviation Company Association, and American Legion Post 214 of Warwick, New York.

**HFI:** Do you have any advice for pilots and maintenance professionals joining the industry?

**Cosimano:** I have been privileged to know individuals who are just starting in our industry without the tremendous benefits that military training provides. I encourage their excitement and enthusiasm. The path to being able to sustain oneself is long and very expensive, made more so with the latest certification regulations. I believe that helicopter companies, whenever possible, should incorporate second-in-command programs for pilots and apprentice programs for technicians. Well-trained people will be more difficult to find in the very near future; they are the primary ingredient to ensure a positive growth of our industry.

Martin J. Pociask is curator of Helicopter Foundation International.

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